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U.S. Catholic Historian, Volume 33, Number 4, Fall 2015, pp. 79-103  
(Article)

Published by The Catholic University of America Press  
DOI: 10.1353/cht.2015.0030



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# William Donovan, the Office of Strategic Services, and Catholic Intelligence Sources during World War II

*Michael Graziano\**

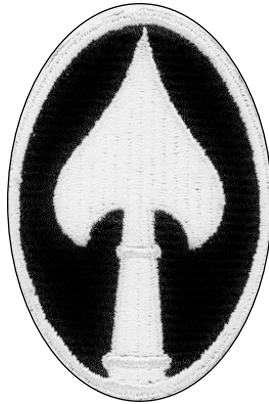
*The Office of Strategic Services (OSS), an American intelligence agency during World War II, demonstrates the changing nature of anti-Catholicism within the American national security state during and after the war. Led by the Catholic lawyer, soldier, and politician William J. Donovan (1883–1959), the OSS eagerly sought to utilize Catholic individuals, ideas, and institutions as part of the war effort. The OSS worked with prominent Catholic leaders at home and abroad in an attempt to both guide Catholic perceptions of the war and leverage Catholic institutions as sources of strategic information. Somewhat paradoxically, the OSS and Donovan were interested in this information at least in part because of anti-Catholic assumptions then prevalent within the defense community and broader American culture. These anti-Catholic ideas shaped American intelligence operations during World War II and inadvertently increased demand for Catholic and other minority religious expertise within the post-war American intelligence system. The OSS's success in working with Catholic institutions, including the Holy See, helped convince American defense and intelligence leaders of the strategic necessity of religious toleration and contributed to the growing pluralist discourse within the domestic United States.*

## Introduction

Established in 1942, the Office of Strategic Services (OSS), a forerunner of the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA), coordinated U.S. intelligence and espionage activities during the Second World War. The OSS's value to the war effort has long been contested. Many have contended that the OSS was more bark than bite, that despite scattered war-time suc-

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\*I would like to thank Cara Burnidge, Jeffrey Wheatley, and Andy McKee for their comments on earlier versions of this essay. I would also like to thank the anonymous reviewers for their generous and helpful critiques.



Insignia of the Office of Strategic Services (OSS), forerunner to the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) (Courtesy of the The OSS Society).

cesses, it was ultimately a “sideshow.”<sup>1</sup> General Dwight Eisenhower, Commander of the Allied Forces in Europe during the war, for his part, said that the OSS’s work during the Normandy landings of June 6, 1944 was “worth a division.”<sup>2</sup> Despite its disputed success, the OSS fostered an exchange of ideas, attracting an eclectic variety of academic, military, government, and business leaders. While a short-lived (1942–1945) and largely ineffectual spy agency may seem an odd place to consider the development of U.S. Catholicism and its relationship to the state, the OSS, located at the junction of domestic and foreign affairs, operated in a liminal space that necessitated unlikely alliances, serving to illustrate the changing relationship between American foreign relations and the Catholic Church during World War II.

The life of OSS director, William “Wild Bill” Donovan (1883–1959), a Catholic lawyer, politician, and soldier, traces the American dream and its limits during the interwar period. The arc of Donovan’s life crossed the United States’ emergence as a superpower and the rise of state-aided religious pluralism. Donovan’s life and times also illustrate the complex nature of American anti-Catholicism in the first half of the twentieth century. Anti-Catholic assumptions within American intelligence operations during World War II inadvertently increased demand for Catholic and other minority religious expertise within the American intelligence system. The OSS’s use of

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1. Rhodri Jeffreys-Jones, *Cloak and Dollar: A History of American Secret Intelligence* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2003), 145.

2. Louis Menand, “Wild Thing,” *The New Yorker*, March 14, 2011, <http://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2011/03/14/wild-thing-louis-menand>. Menand’s essay offers a different perspective than Eisenhower’s, and is worth reading to understand many of the most common criticisms lobbed at Donovan and the OSS.

the Catholic Church in its operations demonstrated to many powerful Protestants in government the utility of encouraging the strategic toleration of Catholics during and after the war. While the OSS's goal was not to change public attitudes about Catholicism—it operated largely in secret—the value it placed on Catholic sources and assets would ultimately benefit American Catholics and the public image of U.S. Catholicism even while it drew upon old anti-Catholic stereotypes. American intelligence officers of the OSS, especially Donovan, navigated between the Catholic Church as an international intelligence resource and as a domestic political liability, all while creating new intelligence networks that aligned Catholicism with American policy interests. With Donovan orchestrating this new arrangement, the Catholic Church became a potential ally, but not without danger.

### Donovan and the Costs of Catholicism Between the Wars

As the only director of the OSS, Donovan remains a legend within the U.S. intelligence and military community. Donovan inspired either adoration or revulsion with little in between. To many, he was an American James Bond before the fictional British spy was created. As one of Donovan's colleagues recalled, "Bill Donovan is the sort of guy who thought nothing of parachuting into France, blowing up a bridge, pissing in Luftwaffe gas tanks, then dancing on the roof of the St. Regis Hotel with a German spy."<sup>3</sup> Sentiments like these would echo through the memories of many who associated with Wild Bill. He won the Medal of Honor in World War I and argued cases before the U.S. Supreme Court before leading the OSS. When Donovan died in 1959, President Eisenhower remarked that "we have lost the last hero."<sup>4</sup> Donovan's Catholicism, however, is not usually the focus of attention.<sup>5</sup> Donovan's early life and career provide one way to understand why Donovan's OSS utilized American Catholics at home and reached out to the Holy See abroad.

Born in 1883 in Buffalo, New York, and raised Catholic, Donovan was a product of the last great systematized attempt to keep American Catholics out of political power in the United States. Donovan's family heritage went

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3. Quoted in Walter L. Hixson, *Parting the Curtain: Propaganda, Culture, and the Cold War, 1945–1961* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1998), 3.

4. Anthony Cave Brown, *The Last Hero: Wild Bill Donovan* (New York: Times Books, 1982), 2.

5. Many biographies of Donovan mention his Catholicism only in passing, usually as part of his childhood and upbringing. See Cave Brown, *The Last Hero* 17; Richard Dunlop, *Donovan: America's Master Spy* (Chicago: Rand McNally, 1982), 16–17. For one notable exception, see Douglas C. Waller, *Wild Bill Donovan: The Spymaster Who Created the OSS and Modern American Espionage* (New York: Free Press, 2012).

back to Ireland by way of the Irish shanty towns that dotted nineteenth-century Buffalo, New York. Though his family dropped the “O” from their name—transitioning from the O’Donovans of County Cork to the Donovans of Buffalo—they remained Catholic. After graduating from Columbia Law School, the First World War took Donovan to France, where he led the “Fighting Irish” of New York’s famed 69th Infantry Regiment.<sup>6</sup>

Upon his return to civilian life, William Donovan found himself an Irish Catholic and a Republican at a time when that made him something of an oddity among both. His legal career took off after President Calvin Coolidge appointed him to the Justice Department, and Donovan eventually became assistant to the Attorney General. The limits of his upward mobility became apparent during the presidential election of 1928. The *New York Times* reported Donovan was the “prime favorite” to be Republican Herbert Hoover’s running mate.<sup>7</sup> Yet party insiders had trouble deciding whether a Catholic on the Republican ticket would hurt or help their chances against the Democratic nominee, the Catholic Al Smith. Eventually they decided against Donovan. The climate of the general election testified to the wisdom of their decision; Smith’s campaign was savaged by anti-Catholic protests and attacks in the media. One such joke went that after Al Smith lost the election, he sent Pope Pius XI a one-word telegram: “Unpack.”<sup>8</sup>

Donovan’s fortune failed to improve after the election. As Hoover built his cabinet, Donovan was widely rumored to be the new president’s choice for Attorney General.<sup>9</sup> Newspapers reported the appointment as all but formally announced.<sup>10</sup> These rumors sparked a popular backlash against the possibility of a Catholic leading the Justice Department. Hostile editorials in the newspapers and Ku Klux Klan protests inflamed these opinions.<sup>11</sup> The idea that a Catholic and an opponent of Prohibition would serve as the nation’s highest lawyer was unthinkable to many Americans.<sup>12</sup> Already frustrated by his failure to secure the Vice Presidential nomination, Donovan had pinned his hopes on the appointment. He had to settle for the position of

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6. Waller, *Wild Bill Donovan*, 12.

7. Richard V. Oulahan, “Three Quit Lowden Ranks,” *New York Times*, June 11, 1928.

8. Quoted in Robert A. Slayton, *Empire Statesman: The Rise and Redemption of Al Smith* (New York: Free Press, 2007), 309.

9. William J. Vanden Heuvel, “Donovan, William J. (Wild Bill),” ed. Roger Newman, *The Yale Biographical Dictionary of American Law* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2009), 169–170.

10. Richard V. Oulahan, “Morrow Pressed by Leaders to Head Hoover’s Cabinet,” *New York Times*, January 21, 1929.

11. “Hoover Pays Visit to Coolidge Again,” *New York Times*, January 10, 1929.

12. L.C. Speers, “Problems That Confront President Hoover,” *New York Times*, March 10, 1929.

Deputy Attorney General instead. This was an experience Donovan would not soon forget. After the personal embarrassment of the 1928 election and his subsequent loss in the 1932 New York Gubernatorial election, Donovan did not divert attention away from his Catholic identity. If anything, he seemed to throw caution to the wind, speaking openly of the need for more Catholics, and people familiar with Catholicism, within the U.S. government. Donovan argued that America needed Catholic leaders at a “national” rather than simply a “parochial” level.<sup>13</sup>

This experience had important consequences for Donovan’s later career, including his time spent leading the OSS and his outreach to the Holy See during World War II. First and foremost, it forced Donovan to appreciate the complexity of religious identity. When Donovan worked in the Department of Justice, for example, he led one of the most successful Prohibition-era raids, seizing massive amounts of illegal alcohol and money. Nonetheless, his detractors pegged him as an anti-Prohibition activist since his religious affiliation was associated with that position. From Donovan’s point of view, this assumption on the part of his political detractors was a costly mistake. In assuming that all Catholics behaved a certain way, they lost out on a well-qualified candidate to lead the Department of Justice. (For those familiar with Donovan, it will not come as much of a surprise that he was a firm believer that the best man for any job *was* Donovan.) And it was not only Protestants who mistook him: when Donovan ran unsuccessfully for the New York Governorship, he discovered that some of his fellow Catholic citizens saw him as insufficiently Catholic. Aspects of Donovan’s lifestyle—not least, his wealth—separated him from American Catholic culture in the inter-war period. Some saw him as soft on the question of Irish independence.<sup>14</sup> In his personal life, Donovan married a Protestant and the couple’s children, though raised Catholic, were not educated in parochial schools. There were even whispers that, with only two children, the Donovans might have used artificial contraception. These claims weakened his Catholic credentials, regardless of their veracity.<sup>15</sup>

Like Al Smith, Donovan found himself caught between different poles of American anti-Catholicism. As powerful Catholic politicians seeking national office, both men’s religion marked them as theologically abhorrent

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13. “Donovan Sees Need for Church Leaders: Holds Spiritual and Cultural Promotion Should Be on Nation-Wide Basis,” *New York Times*, March 1, 1935.

14. “Col. Donovan Censured: Members of Irish Societies Ask His Removal From Post,” *New York Times*, November 24, 1941.

15. Staff Correspondent, “Donovan Answers Whispers on Faith: Niagara Alumni Hear Him Deny That He Is Not Living Up to Tenets of Catholicism,” *New York Times*, October 25, 1932; Brown, *The Last Hero*, 124.

to conservative Protestants yet also politically untrustworthy to more liberal, secular Americans. Longstanding Protestant fear of Catholic designs on church-state separation only exacerbated these worries. In his astute study of Al Smith's campaign, Finbarr Curtis observed the irony of these "worries" at a time when the KKK could be quoted in the *New York Times* as a reasonable source of information about both men. "Catholics like Smith were charged with a uniquely high burden to decry hypothetical ecclesiastical power," Curtis writes, "even while Protestant institutions exercised actual religious hegemony in American politics."<sup>16</sup> Like Smith, Donovan knew he would have to appear sufficiently "secular" in order to be politically successful. Rhodri Jeffreys-Jones interprets Donovan's later actions in the OSS as his way to square the nativist circle, performing "the final rite of passage that would transport him from his near-Fenian origins to a position of respectability in the blue blood establishment."<sup>17</sup>

Acknowledging the complexity of religious identity allowed Donovan to conceptualize Catholicism and the Holy See in ways different than many of his non-Catholic colleagues in the upper echelons of American government. Donovan understood that religious identity was not deterministic. From his own experience, he knew that being Catholic did not necessarily make one opposed to Prohibition or supportive of Fascism. Donovan understood the link between lay Catholics and the Vatican, often assumed to be unbreakable by those Americans with little knowledge of Catholicism, to be far less restrictive. Donovan possessed the strategic knowledge that comes from being *in* power, but not *of* it, and this understanding contributed to Donovan's approach to intelligence. His Catholicism produced a set of assumptions about American politics which, when combined with his intelligence work, made clear the strategic necessity of religious tolerance at home and abroad.

## Donovan and the Office of Strategic Services

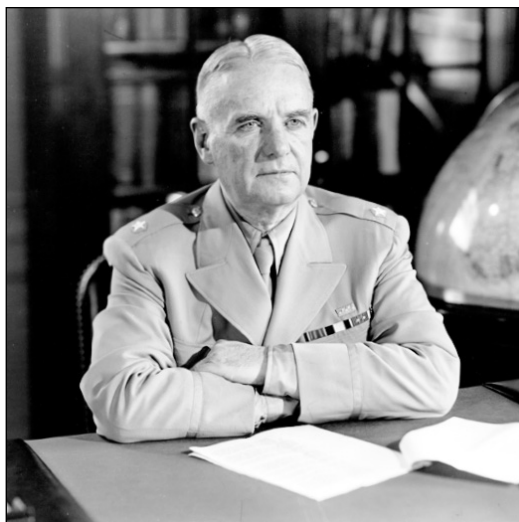
When President Franklin D. Roosevelt called upon Donovan to engage in intelligence work in 1941, it was clear that the threat of war was not an antidote to anti-Catholicism or anti-Semitism.<sup>18</sup> One year previously, Protestant publications had slammed FDR's attempt to appoint a "personal repre-

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16. Finbarr Curtis, "The Fundamental Faith of Every True American: Secularity and Institutional Loyalty in Al Smith's 1928 Presidential Campaign," *The Journal of Religion* 91, no. 4 (October 2011): 519–544, 521.

17. Jeffreys-Jones, *Cloak and Dollar*, 143. The Fenian brotherhood supported the creation of an independent Irish Republic.

18. Donovan was first appointed "Coordinator of Information" in July 1941. This office was restructured in June 1942 and renamed the Office of Strategic Services. See Waller, *Wild Bill Donovan*, 71, 116.



William J. Donovan, director of the Office of Strategic Services (National Archives and Records Administration, College Park, Maryland, identifier 6851006).

sentative” to the Holy See, where the U.S. had no formal diplomatic presence. Roosevelt had good reason to attempt an appointment—more American involvement at the Vatican might help reign in his political opponent Father Charles Coughlin and weaken American Catholic isolationism—but the plan backfired. In protest, Protestant leaders met at the “Emergency Conference on Religious Liberty,” urging Roosevelt to cancel the appointment “out of respect to the historical and constitutional principle of a separate Church and State.”<sup>19</sup> The outcry likely would have been worse had it not been overtaken by world events: the day before Protestant leaders met to protest Myron C. Taylor’s appointment as the president’s representative, Italy declared war on Great Britain and France.

Donovan, however, happily settled into his new position. Donovan’s gleeful excitement for his job and his sometimes romantic view of intelligence endeared him to many of his officers. He also evidenced an unorthodox style for a position that was already, by definition, most unorthodox. When in 1942 the Allied invasion of North Africa ran into difficulties and prospects looked grim, Donovan rallied his men at their morning meetings by reading chapters from American history books. On one particularly difficult morning, Donovan chose to read to them about the War of 1812. Fin-

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19. Gerald P. Fogarty, S.J., “The United States and the Vatican, 1939–1984,” in *Papal Diplomacy in the Modern Age*, ed. Peter C. Kent and John F. Pollard (Westport, CT: Praeger, 1994), 230.



ishing the passage, he looked up at his officers—standing around a table in North Africa—to say, “They haven’t burned the White House yet!” Donovan wanted to remind his men that Americans, aided by the Divine, had long beat improbable odds. As one of his officers later recalled, Donovan continued, “You know, boys,

no one in their sense would have bet a dollar that the United States would survive. England had every facility to destroy us completely, yet here we are. Our country, I believe, has a destiny and a meaning in human history that no nation has ever before possessed. Nothing can ever stop us, but the will of God.<sup>20</sup>

While it is unclear how much about the War of 1812 Donovan read—and whether, for example, he noted that the White House *did* eventually burn—it is clear that his men found his theatrics inspiring.

Popular as he was inside the OSS, Donovan still had to carve out a role for himself and his organization within the federal government. The military branches did not trust Donovan’s upstart organization, and General Douglas MacArthur even banned the OSS from operating in the South Pacific. Relations with military intelligence were not much better. The Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) viewed the OSS as a competitor for security dollars, and Director J. Edgar Hoover saw Donovan as a bureaucratic rival for Roosevelt’s time and attention. There was no love lost between the two men. “The Abwehr [German military intelligence] gets better treatment from the FBI than we do,” Donovan once remarked.<sup>21</sup>

Cultivating valuable informants was one way Donovan could distinguish the nascent OSS from its bureaucratic rivals. He wasted little time in reaching out to Catholic leaders at home and abroad. The OSS was the first dedicated espionage arm of the U.S. government to view Catholics as viable sources of information. Even so, the OSS was part of a larger trend in which elements of the federal government reformed their views of Catholicism and developed working relationships with Catholic Americans. These changes were driven by concerns over foreign policy and the changing makeup of the U.S. population.<sup>22</sup> For example, Edgar Hoover eagerly recruited FBI agents from Jesuit schools since he understood those institutions to produce the

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20. Quoted in Stanley Lovell, *Of Spies and Stratagems: Incredible Secrets of World War II Revealed By a Master Spy* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1963), 186–187.

21. Dunlop, *Donovan*, 321.

22. For more on the relationship between American foreign policy and American perceptions of Catholicism, see Katherine D. Moran, “Catholicism and the Making of the U.S. Pacific,” *The Journal of the Gilded Age and Progressive Era* 12, no. 4 (October 2013): 434–474.

ideal form of “Christian manhood.”<sup>23</sup> Mindful of both foreign and domestic developments, Roosevelt’s State Department had cautiously strengthened ties with the Vatican by the eve of World War II.<sup>24</sup>

In early 1942, Donovan met with the Holy See’s representative to the U.S, Apostolic Delegate Archbishop Amleto Giovanni Cicognani. The two discussed what the Vatican might be able to do—unofficially—for the United States during the war. After the meeting, Donovan sent a memo to Roosevelt outlining the discussion:

I had a long visit with the Delegate and from him obtained assurances that there would be made available for us information from all over the World that would be received from their various delegates. He recognizes that a Hitler victory might well mean a modern Avignon for the Papacy. I think that he is very anxious, unofficially, to help in every way possible.<sup>25</sup>

While Cicognani stressed to Donovan that the Vatican’s official position must be that of “strict neutrality,” Donovan reported to the president that “when the war finally ends their position must be beside us.”<sup>26</sup> This was borne out during the war as OSS officers benefitted from documents leaked from the Vatican bureaucracy. When the OSS was informed that Pope Pius XII knew about these information “leaks,” OSS officers concluded they had the support of the pope.<sup>27</sup>

On the domestic front, Donovan’s OSS developed a number of contacts through the OSS’s Foreign Nationalities Branch (FNB), an office tasked with collecting intelligence from foreign nationals and ethnic communities within the United States.<sup>28</sup> In the words of FNB leader, DeWitt Clinton Poole, the office examined “foreign politics as they unfold in the United States,” and this necessarily put the FNB and OSS into contact with numer-

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23. Quoted in Steven Rosswurm, *The FBI and the Catholic Church, 1935–1962* (Amherst, MA: University of Massachusetts Press, 2009), 44.

24. This development is illuminated in Luca Castagna, *A Bridge Across the Ocean: The United States and the Holy See Between the Two World Wars* (Washington, DC: The Catholic University of America Press, 2014).

25. William Donovan, “Memorandum for the President No. 265,” February 18, 1942, Director’s Office Records, NARA Microfilm Publication M1642, Roll 22, National Archives and Records Administration (hereafter NARA).

26. Ibid.

27. “Special Report #81, ‘Ecclesiastical Contact with Allied Intelligence,’” March 6, 1945, RG 226, Entry 210, Box 311, Folder 2, NARA.

28. For more on the FNB, see Lorraine M. Lees, “De Witt Clinton Poole, the Foreign Nationalities Branch and Political Intelligence,” *Intelligence and National Security* 15, no. 4 (December 2000): 81–103.

ous Catholic foreign nationals.<sup>29</sup> One of Donovan's officers would later recall how the director worked tirelessly to "help priests and others linked with the church who were risking death" during the war.<sup>30</sup> Donovan cultivated a number of contacts in the U.S. Catholic Church as well. When the archbishop of New York Francis Spellman requested assistance shipping "various commodities" to the Vatican, Donovan ensured Spellman's cargo passed through the British blockade of Nazi Germany without the risk of search and seizure.<sup>31</sup> Father Fulton Sheen wrote Donovan personally to recommend a friend for OSS employment ("His talents are most unusual") and Donovan was happy to oblige. The OSS later hired Fulton's brother, Private Al Sheen, at Father Sheen's request.<sup>32</sup>

Donovan's outreach to both international and domestic Catholic leaders had other benefits for the U.S. government. There were persistent rumors that Axis powers would attempt a negotiated peace through the Vatican, and Donovan kept his ear to the ground for any signs of this plan coming to fruition. The fine line Pius XII walked to maintain neutrality did not help matters in the view of some American leaders. As the war progressed, concern about secret Axis negotiations with the Vatican morphed into concerns that the Soviet Union and Vatican were near a rapprochement. To this end, Donovan tasked his informants with continually assessing the pope's feelings towards Stalin and the Soviet government.<sup>33</sup> The pope's diplomatic balancing act puzzled the OSS, largely because the OSS underestimated the constraints on Pope Pius's actions.<sup>34</sup> The Vatican's occasional assistance lulled some within the OSS into exaggerating how closely Vatican and U.S. objectives aligned.

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29. *Ibid.*, 85.

30. "Valerio Borghese Ci Serviva," *Epoca*, February 11, 1976, FOIA Electronic Reading Room.

31. Francis Spellman to William Donovan, December 3, 1941, Director's Office Records, NARA Microfilm Publication M1642, Roll 105, NARA.

32. Fulton Sheen to William Donovan, October 7, 1943, Director's Office Records, NARA Microfilm Publication M1642, Roll 71, NARA; Fulton Sheen to William Donovan, March 18, 1944, Director's Office Records, NARA Microfilm Publication M1642, Roll 106, NARA; William Donovan to Fulton Sheen, November 2, 1943, Director's Office Records, NARA Microfilm Publication M1642, Roll 71, NARA.

33. John C. Hughes to William Donovan, "Black Report #5 Additional Information," October 27, 1944, RG 226, Entry 210, Box 311, Folder 2, NARA.

34. Many Cold War American strategists assumed that Vatican and American interests naturally coincided, even though this assumption was continually disproven. This is a theme in much coverage of U.S.-Vatican relations during the Cold War. For several examples, see David Alvarez, *Spies in the Vatican: Espionage and Intrigue from Napoleon to the Holocaust* (Lawrence, KS: University Press of Kansas, 2002); Fogarty, "The United States and the Vatican, 1939-1984"; Marie Gayte, "The Vatican and the Reagan Administration: A Cold War Alliance?," *The Catholic Historical Review* 97, no. 4 (2011): 713-736.

The assumption of shared strategic interests sometimes combined with a general ignorance of the Catholic Church to produce well-meaning, if highly unworkable, suggestions. One of the more harebrained schemes, put forward by OSS's Director of Research and Development, Stanley Lovell, involved a covert OSS operation which—to make a long and rather inventive story short—would strike Mussolini and Hitler with sudden, simultaneous, and irreversible blindness. With both Fascist leaders blinded, Lovell suggested to Donovan that the pope could then issue a “Papal Bull or whatever is appropriate” instructing Catholics around the world on how this sudden blindness illustrated the righteousness of the Allied cause. Helpfully, Lovell even suggested what the pope might say:

My children, God in His infinite wisdom has stricken your leaders blind. His sixth Commandment is Though Shalt Not Kill. This blindness of your leaders is a warning that you should lay down your arms and return to the ways of peace.

This was remarkably audacious even within the pantheon of colorful OSS schemes, which included bombs strapped to bats and weaponized goat dung.<sup>35</sup> Lovell explained that because many of the German and Italian soldiers were Catholics, and Catholics “will heed Pius,” it seemed a sure-fire way to end the war. While Lovell was sensitive to the criticism that “this may appear to be a suggestion of hypocrisy” on the pope’s part, he thought the ends justified the means. “If he can use his high office to stop this killing,” Lovell asked Donovan, “isn’t he advancing the cause of Christianity more than any man on earth?”<sup>36</sup> While Donovan agreed to see a high church official about the idea, both Mussolini and Hitler died with their eyesight fully functional.

The OSS’s interest in Catholicism was not without its operational failures. No case better illustrates the complexities of the OSS’s relationship with Catholicism than the VESSEL operation, one of the most embarrassing moments in the OSS’s brief existence. VESSEL involved OSS operatives buying Vatican documents from a source code-named VESSEL—documents which were later shown to be fabrications. In the meantime, though, many in the OSS Rome office put a great deal of trust in the material, sending it along to Donovan. The documents, in turn, were treated with the highest secrecy and wound up on the desk of President Roosevelt.<sup>37</sup> Donovan was an eager consumer of this information, writing numerous cover letters to

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35. For these and other fascinating plans, see Lovell, *Of Spies and Stratagems*.

36. *Ibid.*, 82–83.

37. For a helpful overview of the VESSEL affair, see Timothy Naftali, “Artifice: James Angleton and X-2 Operations in Italy,” in *The Secrets War: The Office of Strategic Services in World War II*, ed. George Chalou (Washington, DC: National Archives Trust Fund Board, 1992).

Roosevelt introducing each new bit of VESSEL “insight.”<sup>38</sup> Donovan’s excitement is understandable, as the documents appeared to contain a wealth of geopolitical intrigue. The reports contained, for instance, information about Japanese war plans which, if accurate, would have proved incredibly valuable. In an embarrassing turn of events, the VESSEL documents appear to have been fabricated by an unemployed Italian pornographer. That these reports wound up on the president’s desk, eagerly endorsed by Donovan, compounded the embarrassment and political damage.<sup>39</sup>

Even when operations proceeded according to plan, the OSS’s relationship with the Holy See remained fraught with tension. Vatican diplomats were fully aware of the anti-Catholic history of the United States, and their perception of American antipathy to the Catholic Church proved a liability for the OSS.<sup>40</sup> When Allied diplomats made clear they would scuttle any Axis attempt to negotiate a peace through the Holy See, the Vatican diplomats attributed their efforts to lingering prejudice against the Catholic Church. One OSS informant at the Vatican reported that church diplomats thought “the Anglo-Saxons” would never permit a peace to develop in the Vatican, “since the Catholic Church would obtain a too notable success.” Underscoring the level of resentment, the source continued, “Vatican diplomats themselves say this openly.”<sup>41</sup>

Despite these tensions, high-level relations remained cordial. Donovan met personally with Pope Pius XII during the war. Judging from Donovan’s memos to Roosevelt, their discussion covered a range of topics. Donovan and Pius discussed specific intelligence issues, such as “the question of the Japanese embassy placing their radio transmitter in the Vatican” as well as geopolitical developments more broadly, including “communism, Germany, Russia,” and Roosevelt’s 1944 re-election campaign (Pius “expressed great interest in your re-election,” Donovan wrote to Roosevelt).<sup>42</sup> The relation-

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38. Many of these reports (sometimes termed “Black Report” or “Special Black Reports”) bear such introductions. One such example is William Donovan to Franklin Roosevelt, February 16, 1945, Director’s Office Records, NARA Microfilm Publication M1642, Roll 119, NARA.

39. Naftali, “Artifice: James Angleton and X-2 Operations in Italy,” 232. Unexpectedly, the fabricated VESSEL reports would later prove helpful to American officials during the Italian elections of 1948. See Robin Winks, *Cloak and Gown: Scholars in the Secret War, 1939–1961*, 2nd ed. (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1996), 387.

40. These concerns were reinforced by then-recent events, including American popular reactions to the 1936 visit of Cardinal Eugenio Pacelli (the future Pope Pius XII) to the United States. See Castagna, *A Bridge Across the Ocean*. 145–149.

41. Vincent Scamporino to Director, Office of Strategic Services, “Malvina Report No. 54,” October 9, 1944, RG 226, Entry 210, Box 461, Folder 4, NARA.

42. William Donovan to Franklin Roosevelt, July 3, 1944, Director’s Office Records, NARA Microfilm Publication M1642, Roll 30, NARA.

ship between Donovan and the pope seems to have been amicable. While Donovan could be irritated with much of the pope's perceived "fence-sitting," he liked the pope "immensely as a person."<sup>43</sup>

Even in the context of the era, this marked an abrupt change. During the Spanish-American War and World War I, many American leaders had assumed that the Vatican quietly supported America's enemies. While this would continue through the early days of World War II, Donovan's OSS was instrumental in proving the opposite. A 1944 OSS assessment of the Vatican sent to President Roosevelt concluded that "the Vatican is a sure source of aid in [the] fight against the Germans. . . . Diplomatically, the Vatican insists on its neutrality. Actually, the Church in Italy is actively pro-Allied."<sup>44</sup> Donovan and his senior staff saw the Catholic Church as eager to cooperate with American aims, even if the Church could not say so publically.

Conversations such as these convinced Donovan and the OSS of the Church's goodwill for the Allied cause, even if the Vatican's support had to remain quiet and deniable. This was fine with the Americans, since the Church's strength lay in "intelligence and cover." There were many ways to resist, and the OSS was happy to exploit what it termed "the willingness of the Church to collaborate." Once, an African-American U.S. Army soldier, stationed undercover in Rome, became trapped when Germans conducted house-to-house searches near his location. With the American soldier unable to move freely without attracting attention in the largely white city, the Vatican Ethiopian Legation arranged a hasty visit to the officer's location. The legation left Vatican grounds with twenty in their party and returned with twenty-one. This was part of a larger effort: by 1944, the OSS estimated that the majority of Catholic clergy in German-occupied Italy were working with resistance organizations.<sup>45</sup>

Donovan's leadership played a crucial role in developing the intelligence relationship between the U.S. and the Holy See during World War II. Perhaps in part because of his Catholicism, Donovan noticed what his colleagues may have overlooked. When Allied bombs began falling on Italy, Vatican buildings occasionally suffered damage. While not intentionally targeted by Allied Air Forces, Donovan was aware that intention was not always primary when Catholics from around the world viewed the damage. Donovan received reports detailing how Axis propaganda leveraged damage to the Vatican and Castel Gandolfo to show that "U.S. troops do not respect

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43. Quoted in Waller, *Wild Bill Donovan*, 258.

44. OSS Spec. Det. G-2, "The Military Significance of Political Conditions in Rome," February 21, 1944, RG 226, Entry 210, Box 313, Folder 5, NARA.

45. *Ibid.*

Catholic property,” and that the once God-fearing nations of the West were now subservient to Soviet atheism.<sup>46</sup> In response, the OSS proposed battling against this perception in the media, and drew up a plan to “disseminate news throughout Europe by all available means, including underground channels.”<sup>47</sup> “All available means” included the International Center of Information Pro Deo (CIP), a Catholic intelligence source carefully cultivated by Donovan since the early days of the war. The OSS-CIP relationship, known within the OSS as “Operation Pilgrim’s Progress,” illustrates Donovan’s role in shaping pragmatic, if contentious, arrangements between the U.S. state and Catholic-led information networks.

## The OSS and Operation Pilgrim’s Progress

The CIP was a European-wide Catholic journalism network dedicated to using information management tools to re-establish “the place of God in public life.” A largely lay organization, the CIP was managed by the Belgian priest, Felix Morlion, O.P. (1904–1987). The CIP sought to inform secular editors, reporters, and thought leaders about global events, to show how Catholic ideals were relevant to current events, and to entice a non-Catholic audience to consider its perspective. “News is a common denominator by which to gain the attention of every one,” Father Morlion explained, “and what we must do is show the spiritual issues which underlie the news.”<sup>48</sup> He evangelized using the media, part of a larger battle for “public opinion,” as he understood it. Morlion’s subscription list had significant names in journalism and religion including Walter Lippmann, Arthur Krock, Fulton Sheen, John La Farge, S.J., and Elmer Davis.<sup>49</sup>

In July 1942, Father Morlion met with Donovan in New York.<sup>50</sup> An arrangement was worked out in which Morlion’s CIP would provide information to the OSS in exchange for financial assistance in excess of \$2,000 per month.<sup>51</sup> This relationship was less a spy network and more an informa-

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46. David Williamson to William Donovan, “Suggested U.S. Action to Combat Anti-Allied Sentiment Among Catholics Resulting From Vatican Bombings,” March 23, 1944, Director’s Office Records, NARA Microfilm Publication M1642, Roll 98, NARA.

47. Ibid.

48. Felix Morlion, *The Apostolate of Public Opinion* (Montreal: Fides, 1944), 18–19.

49. Ibid., 23.

50. Felix Morlion, “Rapport Sur Les Activities Du Reverend Pere Morlion Dans La Domaine de La Guerre Psychologique,” July 4, 1942, Anna M. Brady Papers, Box 2, Folder 24, Georgetown University Library Special Collections Research Center, Washington, D.C. (hereafter GUL).

51. Frederic Dolbeare to John C. Hughes, October 31, 1944, RG 226, Entry 210, Box 311, Folder 2, NARA. Waller estimates \$2,000 per month, though some OSS documents suggest a higher figure. See Waller, *Wild Bill Donovan*, 257.

tion-sharing agreement, but the bulk of CIP correspondents were to remain unaware of this American support, providing reports to the CIP as they had previously. However, their dispatches and unpublished notes were routed through OSS headquarters where Donovan and others sifted through them for useful intelligence.

The OSS-CIP relationship was born of mutual need. Morlion, at the helm of a Catholic press agency, was in a good position to keep his finger on the pulse of Europe with CIP correspondents, in place before the war began, reporting during the conflict. But the organization was strapped for cash—the usual sources of donations had dried up amidst the war. The OSS, on the other hand, was flush with cash but information-poor. It was a match made in espionage heaven. Donovan and the OSS saw CIP reports as a highly valuable and unique source of information during wartime. The reports themselves were tightly controlled with Donovan receiving each report directly and choosing which to forward on to President Roosevelt. Anyone wishing to view the reports required Donovan's express permission.<sup>52</sup> On one of Morlion's 1944 reports, for example, Donovan scrawled orders at the bottom of the page to "Prepare this for FDR + [Secretary of State Cordell] Hull only—it should be handled by very fewest hands."<sup>53</sup>

Father Morlion had his own motivations for working with the OSS. The OSS thought of him as an ideal cooperator because his "aggressive evangelism" for the Catholic Church put him on the same side as the moral and political ideals for which the U.S. and its allies were fighting.<sup>54</sup> But there were other motivations. Avoiding the draft certainly ranked high on his list of priorities. So too did aiding in his own way his native Belgium. From the earliest days, Morlion kept his Belgian superiors—both political and religious—informed of his work in the U.S.<sup>55</sup> With each increase in the CIP's prestige came more money for the organization that Morlion cherished. To be sure, the arrangement was good for Morlion personally. When the Allies took Rome in 1944, the OSS moved Morlion from New York City to the Vatican.<sup>56</sup> Morlion settled

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52. John C. Hughes to E.J. Putzell, November 4, 1944, RG 226, Entry 210, Box 322, Folder 2, NARA.

53. John C. Hughes to William Donovan, "Special Black Report," October 23, 1944, RG 226, Entry 210, Box 311, Folder 2, NARA.

54. Huntington Harris, "Field Report on the 'Pilgrim's Progress Project'," November 15, 1945, RG 226, Entry 216, Box 3, Folder 1, NARA.

55. Felix Morlion, "Rapport Sur Les Missions de Propagande Du R.P. Felix Andre Edouard Morlion O.P.," February 20, 1942, Anna M. Brady Papers, Box 2, Folder 20, GUL. Because Belgium was a war-time ally of the United States this arrangement was not necessarily surprising.

56. Frederic Dolbeare to John C. Hughes, October 31, 1944, RG 226, Entry 210, Box 311, Folder 2, NARA.



in among his Dominican colleagues and continued developing the CIP's European network. Morlion was eager to return to Brussels, but the OSS persuaded him to remain in Rome to collect additional information. To that end, the OSS increased its financial support of the CIP while Morlion stayed at its helm. The OSS provided funds for two assistants to Morlion, totaling \$1,800 for the year. Other expenditures included financing for CIP offices in Rome and Lisbon, a \$500 monthly stipend for Morlion's personal upkeep, and the continued "basic payments to the C.I.P. network."<sup>57</sup>

Quite often the OSS assumed that Catholic sensibilities—and the Vatican's more specifically—squared neatly with those of the United States. Their assumption appears strange, especially considering the ambient anti-Catholicism during the war. Yet many OSS officers believed that the Vatican, caught between Fascism and Communism, had a natural ally in the United States. Even so, many in the OSS failed to understand that the interests of the CIP and the Vatican paralleled, rather than merged, with U.S. interests during the war. When an early OSS planning document, devising ways to more effectively employ the CIP, suggested developing it into a "Catholic Intelligence Agency" (bearing the acronym "CIA," no less), it betrayed an ignorance as to the goals and motivations of groups like CIP.<sup>58</sup> For Father Morlion the war was never only about the defeat of the Axis, but something more: a chance to realize an improved "apostolate of public opinion" that Morlion had been pursuing for years before the war with earlier CIP iterations. Morlion was quite clear about his motivation when he recruited new CIP correspondents: "All this concerns the important apostolate for the spreading of God's idea in public life and public opinion," Morlion explained, "and at the same time our collaboration in the winning of the war."<sup>59</sup>

With funding and support from the U.S. government, Morlion launched a number of activities directed at winning the war and the peace that would follow. In an ironic twist considering the politically charged nature of the CIP's involvement with the U.S. government, Morlion worked to address European Catholic critiques of the United States. Concerns about the irreligious nature of Americans had caused some European Catholics to avoid participation in the underground resistance to Nazi Germany, and Morlion labored to correct this perception. "The truth about the spiritual attitude of America," Morlion wrote, "must counteract the strong prejudice about

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57. Ibid.

58. "Untitled CIP Planning Document," n.d., RG 226, Entry 210, Box 388, Folder 6, NARA.

59. Allen Dulles to George Bowden, October 10, 1942, RG 226, Entry 214, Box 7, NARA.

American ‘materialism’ and its dangers for the post war world,” a belief he emphasized in his professional writings. In addition, the CIP conducted targeted radio broadcasts in Europe and placed special articles of Catholic interest in European magazines. The CIP even set up a “daily supply of European news” for the National Conference of Christians and Jews, a group promoting religious tolerance within the United States.<sup>60</sup>

Donovan made clear that the CIP was not an OSS subsidiary. The OSS was keen to maintain a distance between representatives of the U.S. government and the Catholic Church. OSS policed this perception even within its internal communication. When the OSS London office identified the CIP as a “Roman Catholic Church Intelligence outfit” working for the OSS, headquarters quickly clarified matters by replying that such an understanding was “misleading.” The OSS’s head office also noted, with more than a touch of understatement, that if this description should reach the ears of Church officials “difficulties are bound to arise.”<sup>61</sup> The relationship between the OSS and the CIP illuminates how Donovan’s understanding of institutional nuances within the Catholic Church worked to the OSS’s benefit. Unlike his Protestant colleagues, Donovan was quick to understand that despite claims from Rome to the contrary, the Catholic Church was not a monolith. Working with some members of the Catholic Church, such as the CIP, did not necessarily mean approval or cooperation from other Catholic individuals and institutions.

Importantly, Operation Pilgrim’s Progress was not conducted with the Holy See’s formal approval. Since the CIP was not a part of the Vatican bureaucracy, it was unnecessary. The relationship between Donovan’s OSS and the Catholic Church in Rome was a curious mixture of friendship and tension. Donovan trusted Morlion to smooth out any institutional snags from within the Vatican bureaucracy. In November 1944, Morlion sent a coded message to the OSS advising that he had met with Pope Pius about expanding CIP operations into Brussels.<sup>62</sup> After his audience with the pope, Morlion received a note from Monsignor Giovanni Battista Montini (the

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60. Felix Morlion, “Summary of the Collaboration with the Belgian War Effort of the International Center of Information Pro Deo (Itercip), Founded by Rev. Felix Morlion, O.P., Director of the Belgian Catholic Press Central,” February 7, 1943, Anna M. Brady Papers, Box 2, Folder 21, GUL. For more on the NCCJ, see Kevin M. Schultz, *Tri-Faith America: How Catholics and Jews Held Postwar America to Its Protestant Promise* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011).

61. Office of Strategic Services to Ustravic, London, 1943, RG 226, Entry 210, Box 453, NARA.

62. Caserta, Italy and Office of Strategic Services, “Cable #11774,” November 4, 1944, RG 226, Entry 210, Box 311, Folder 2, NARA.

future Pope Paul VI), one of Pius's right-hand men in the Vatican's Secretariat of State office. He wrote to Morlion in order to express the pope's appreciation for the activities of the CIP:

Following the audience which he deigned to grant you, His Holiness is pleased to witness anew the interest which he has taken in that which you have exposed on the different activities of the Centers of Information "Pro Deo" (CIP) and how he has been touched by the devotion with which you personally and your collaborators carry on the important work for the penetration of religious ideas in public opinion.<sup>63</sup>

To the extent that the pope was aware of the double nature of Morlion's organization—that it was acting as an information network for Donovan's OSS—Pope Pius seems to have tacitly approved, or at least allowed it to continue by not opposing its activities. Rather than a nefarious Catholic spy network, the CIP emerges as an independent-minded group concerned primarily with shoring up its operating budget and shielding Catholicism from the twin threats of Nazism and Communism.

The nature of Operation Pilgrim's Progress—relying upon a network of journalists scattered throughout Europe—also meant certain drawbacks. The journalists were not trained intelligence officers, and they did not necessarily prioritize American concerns. One OSS memo slammed the CIP as being "worse than useless," since the reports often reflected little more than the political prejudices of their journalistic authors. OSS officers reading this material might have found themselves the target of, rather than the creator of, misinformation.<sup>64</sup> Curiously, others in the OSS disliked the program since the informants were wont to engage in "unadulterated propaganda," a critique which appears to have been made entirely straight-faced.<sup>65</sup> For example, one OSS officer bemoaned the London correspondent's fixation on Poland, complaining that each report from London contained a "plentiful sprinkling of the rankest sort of Polish propaganda." Still, others in the OSS disagreed, arguing that events had borne out the value of this information.<sup>66</sup> Those who valued Operation Pilgrim's Progress cited the program's ability to acquire information in hard-to-reach locales, especially the Vatican and Eastern

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63. J.B. Montini to Felix Morlion, November 17, 1944, Anna M. Brady Papers, Box 2, Folder 11, GUL.

64. Alan Scaife to Frederic Dolbeare, "H.J. Reports," October 23, 1943, RG 226, Entry 210, Box 414, Folder 1, NARA. This referred specifically to one of CIP's correspondents, code named "Hank Judah."

65. London Desk to Chief, S.I., "HJ Reports," June 30, 1944, RG 226, Entry 210, Box 414, Folder 4, NARA.

66. Frederic Dolbeare to Earnest Brooks, June 30, 1944, RG 226, Entry 210, Box 414, Folder 4, NARA.

Europe. The U.S. Department of State, for one, was pleased with the OSS's ability to gather information on Eastern Europe through the CIP.<sup>67</sup>

Operation Pilgrim's Progress also provided the OSS with an opportunity to leverage the strengths of the American Catholics the OSS had welcomed into its ranks. One of the many U.S. Catholics in conversation with the OSS was Columbia historian Carlton J.H. Hayes (1882–1964). A devout Catholic, Hayes had helped found the American Catholic Historical Association, serving as its president in 1931.<sup>68</sup> As both a Catholic and an expert on modern European nationalism, the OSS asked Hayes to recommend young Catholic Americans who might be suitable for “confidential” work in Spain and Portugal. Hayes suggested his student Emmet J. Hughes (1920–1982).<sup>69</sup>

Hughes was a good fit for the organization since his perception of both America and the Catholic Church squared neatly with the OSS's estimation. His supervisors had read with interest Hughes' book, *The Church and the Liberal Society*.<sup>70</sup> Hughes, also a Catholic, saw the Church as did his OSS employers: antiquated in some ways, more modern than it let on, and ultimately friendly to the Allies. After some finagling with the U.S. State Department, Hughes was attached to the American embassy in Madrid where Professor Hayes would soon assume the ambassadorship. Together they went to work “developing indirectly Catholic approaches” to swaying key Spaniards toward the Allied cause. The OSS evaluations of Hughes' performance were accurate. Even in Hughes' evaluation, though, there is a latent anti-Catholicism that helped contribute to the problems the OSS had—and Hughes was trying to fix:

(a) despite [Hughes'] youth he is extremely well prepared to understand the special methods which must be used to bring the passionate anti-liberal and anti-democratic Spanish circles to a better understanding of democracy, (b) He is extremely prudent and has a sense of nuance which will make it easy for him to work on the Latin mentality, (c) he has a quiet and honest way of acquiring confidence among Catholics.<sup>71</sup>

Hughes and Hayes were tasked with handling the “wrong” kind of Catholicism. Spanish Catholicism, and its pro-Franco proclivities, was not the

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67. James Clement Dunn to Ferdinand Mayer, February 13, 1945, RG 226, Entry 210, Box 415, Folder 2, NARA.

68. “ACHA Presidents,” American Catholic Historical Association, <http://www.acha-history.org/about/presidents/>.

69. Carlton J.H. Hayes to James P. Baxter, January 7, 1942, RG 226, Entry 210, Box 388, Folder 1, NARA.

70. Emmet John Hughes, *The Church and the Liberal Society* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1944).

71. “Memorandum: Attention Mr. Dulles,” August 5, 1942, RG 226, Entry 210, Box 388, Folder 1, NARA.

species of Catholicism that the OSS desired to develop. American intelligence officers wanted to mold this Catholicism into something more “democratic,” more congenial to American aims.

To accomplish this, both Hayes and Hughes were assisted by resources from Operation Pilgrim’s Progress. In a relationship likely facilitated by the OSS, Anna M. Brady, a close associate of Father Morlion and the CIP’s stateside manager, wrote to Ambassador Hayes and complimented his recruitment of Hughes. “I have rarely met a person,” she wrote of Hughes, “more gifted and better prepared at his age for the special work which can be done in connection with the Pro Deo methods.” And while Brady anticipated the ambassador running into Spanish opposition, he should rest assured that CIP-designed propaganda was on its way to win over Spanish hearts and minds.<sup>72</sup> Hughes, for his part, proved to be a valuable investment by American intelligence. The Rome bureau chief for *Time* during the crucial Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) Italian campaign in 1948, Hughes eventually became a speechwriter for President Eisenhower.<sup>73</sup>

The OSS’s assessment of Operation Pilgrim’s Progress was mixed. A formal OSS report on the matter conveyed excitement about the program’s potential but found that its output generally had not been worth the expense. The report lamented that the “results achieved by this project appear to be of a rather negative character” but observed that this was mostly due to a lack of attention directed at the project. Pilgrim’s Progress had never been the focus of any one office, and responsibilities for the program had been spread across too many divisions of OSS. Some OSS reports argued that the most valuable part of the project was the operational framework that had been established—working with people and groups close to the Vatican—and thus it was perhaps more accurate to think of the operation during the war as an investment “of considerable future value.” Even pessimistic assessments within the OSS noted that the relationship might prove useful in future American goals abroad. The OSS was mindful of the looming postwar situation in which many Americans expected Italy to play an important role. If Pilgrim’s Progress was maintained, the report concluded, it should be leveraged to develop relationships directly with members of the Roman Curia—which the OSS assessed as “both desirable and possible.”<sup>74</sup>

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72. Anna M. Brady to Carlton J.H. Hayes, July 30, 1942, RG 226, Entry 210, Box 388, Folder 1, NARA.

73. Glenn Fowler, “Emmet Hughes, 61, Journalist; Speechwriter for Eisenhower,” *New York Times*, September 20, 1982, <http://www.nytimes.com/1982/09/20/obituaries/emmet-hughes-61-journalist-speechwriter-for-eisenhower.html>.

74. Harris, “Field Report on the ‘Pilgrim’s Progress Project.’”

In the end, what finally killed Operation Pilgrim's Progress was the Allied victory. The defeat of Germany and Japan brought about a slew of budgeting changes, and the OSS was an early victim. Various pieces of the OSS were transferred to the Departments of State and War.<sup>75</sup> When Pilgrim's Progress funds ran out in December 1945, OSS officers arranged for an informal relationship to continue, and there is evidence that a connection between American intelligence and the CIP continued into the postwar period.<sup>76</sup>

Regardless of its utility in the war effort, the U.S. government subsidizing a Catholic journalism network was an image that the OSS did not want the American public to see. As one memo explained, the CIP reports underwent redaction by the OSS prior to their distribution to other sectors of the U.S. government. It was important that the State Department did not receive CIP reports directly, for example, due to the "fear" that the State Department would then be open to attacks that it was under the sway of the pope.<sup>77</sup> Even as the war wound down, OSS leadership feared leaks about the extent of OSS-Catholic relations and took steps to limit the U.S. government's public exposure. One OSS memo, written a few days after Japan's surrender, testified to the OSS's desire to protect relationships with "high Church circles" in the new postwar world. Lester C. Houck, the Chairman of the OSS's Reporting Board, described the OSS's difficult position:

To remove all indications of any connection with the Church would be to destroy the meat of this material. Needless to say, however, any slightest leak regarding the origin would greatly embarrass both the United States and the Vatican and would completely 'blow' highly valuable sources.

The solution was to obscure these relationships even within the OSS's records. "Since the appearance on the manifest of such titles as 'Country: Vatican—Subject: Appeals to the Pope' would be rather revealing," Houck wrote, they thought it unwise to label them normally. Instead, records of

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75. Michael Warner, "Salvage and Liquidation: The Creation of the Central Intelligence Group," *Studies in Intelligence* (Fall 1996), <https://www.cia.gov/library/center-for-the-study-of-intelligence/csi-publications/csi-studies/studies/96unclass/salvage-and-liquidation.html>.

76. 209 to Ebert, September 21, 1945, RG 226, Entry 210, Box 415, Folder 11, NARA; Harris, "Field Report on the 'Pilgrim's Progress Project'"; Stephen Penrose to James Angleton, December 29, 1945, RG 226, Entry 210, Box 415, Folder 12, NARA; Felix Morlion, "Conclusions For Immediate Action in Fact of the Increased Social-Communist Threat," 1951, CIA-RDP80R01731R003300410030-2, NARA (CREST Database).

77. Colonel Buxton to David Bruce, "Cable #04150," August 4, 1943, RG 226, Entry 210, Box 443, Folder 7, NARA.

OSS relationships with Vatican officials and Catholic groups would be placed in dummy record groups and given bland titles to limit their circulation after the war.<sup>78</sup>

This put the OSS in the curious position of going to great lengths to hide what was a largely undramatic working relationship with a major U.S. religious group. The situation also presented challenges for the future. As American intelligence officers looked toward the rebuilding of post-war Italy and the elections that would accompany it, they were already well aware that the Vatican's support could be a great aid to American plans in the region. While there was something to be said for the OSS preserving the Holy See's perceived neutrality, worrying about anti-Catholic sentiment within their own government was counterproductive to American foreign policy goals.

### **The Importance of “Hyphenated” American Spies**

The OSS's interest in religion, and in Catholicism specifically, can best be explained by placing the OSS within its political, cultural, and bureaucratic constraints during the war. Donovan's experiences as an American Catholic soldier and politician allowed him to see the value of working with the Vatican during World War II even as his motivations for doing so were entwined with the same anti-Catholic assumptions that made engaging the Vatican politically dangerous in the first place. This was not limited to Donovan. Many OSS officers' interest in the Vatican derived from American Protestant suspicion that the Vatican was the best-informed entity in the world. The OSS's faith in the Vatican as a source of valuable information led American intelligence officers to explain away dubious Vatican intelligence while trusting information that may have appeared too good to be true.

Given the OSS's assumption that the Vatican was rich with strategic intelligence, it is ironic that the Vatican was in reality poorly informed throughout the war.<sup>79</sup> The image of the Vatican as an oasis of secret knowledge—awash in information valuable to the Allies if only they could access it—stemmed from the same American anti-Catholicism that derailed Donovan's earlier, promising political career. Donovan's internalization of these perceptions testifies to the power and reach of anti-Catholicism in mid-twentieth century American culture. While Donovan's political career would stumble on many of the same religious and cultural obstacles as did Al Smith, Donovan's role as head of a wartime intelligence agency would be successful

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78. 789 and Lester Houck, “Snapdragon Reports,” August 18, 1945, RG 226, Entry 214, Box 7, Folder 7, NARA.

79. Alvarez, *Spies in the Vatican*, 268.



The William J. Donovan Memorial Room at the Central Intelligence Agency Museum, Langley, Virginia. In 2011 the museum opened a redesigned gallery dedicated to the history of the Office of Strategic Services (Courtesy of the Central Intelligence Agency).

at least in part *because* he and other American Catholics engaged with, and perhaps ultimately defied, those same anti-Catholic tendencies.

After the war, Donovan labored to make sure that the wartime relationships with Catholic and other religious organizations would not be abandoned out of political fear. Donovan wrote a 1946 article for *LIFE* magazine in which he critiqued the course of postwar intelligence. One of his chief complaints was that there were no visionary intelligence leaders with the knowledge and skill to capitalize on American diversity:

Within our borders, the same foreign-born experts who guided us so valuably during the war are prepared to help secure the peace. Regrettably, the present intelligence setup shies away from these people. In some instances government agencies require a pedigree of two or three generations before they will entrust an officer with intelligence responsibilities.<sup>80</sup>

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80. William Donovan, "Intelligence: Key to Defense," *LIFE*, September 30, 1946, 118.



Donovan knew that such an approach failed to make the most of America's diverse human resources, and that was not just culturally intolerant—it was strategically foolish.

Donovan used his platform in *LIFE* to tell Americans that from the perspective of the OSS, one of the most important lessons of the war was that “‘hyphenated’ Americans were useful.” America’s religious and racial diversity proved valuable to the OSS and its operations. “An unusual circumstance that helped us was the melting-pot nature of the American population,” Donovan wrote. He continued,

No other nation has in its population so many diverse national strains as are found in ours. During the war some thought the unassimilated admixture would prove a weakness that our enemies would penetrate and exploit. Instead the vast pool of linguistic skills and special racial and regional knowledge became one of our prime assets. No matter what region was involved, we were always able to muster for intelligence work either American citizens or friendly aliens versed in its language, politics, history, and customs.<sup>81</sup>

Donovan’s argument for the importance of these “hyphenated Americans” was part of the larger movement to embrace the country’s increased religious pluralism. Yet Donovan had other aims. The OSS had been dismantled the year before, and Donovan was writing in *LIFE* to build political support for a new intelligence agency (preferably with Donovan at its helm). Donovan lamented America’s failure to capitalize on its cultural diversity by creating an OSS-like organization. That Donovan chose to highlight diversity is telling, especially with his (and the OSS’s) experience at the Vatican and with American Catholic organizations in mind. In the meantime, Donovan’s work did not go unnoticed by the Church. At a 1946 ceremony at the residence of New York archbishop, Cardinal Francis Spellman, Donovan was awarded the Papal Order of Merit of St. Sylvester.<sup>82</sup> Donovan told the *New York Times* that “the award was symbolic of the work done in the war by OSS.”<sup>83</sup>

Of course, the OSS was by design a secret organization. The organization’s contribution to American pluralism was not in the form of public service announcements or media campaigns. Instead, the OSS’s long-term effect on American Catholicism might best be seen in the legacy of the numerous Catholic officers who served in the OSS’s spiritual successor, the Central

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81. *Ibid.*, 117.

82. “Papal Order for Donovan: Former OSS Director to Get St. Sylvester Award Tonight,” *New York Times*, January 30, 1946.

83. “For Distinguished Service to Humanity,” *New York Times*, January 31, 1946.

Intelligence Agency. Two future CIA Directors were Catholic OSS officers who had served under Donovan, William Colby, serving from 1973–1976, and William Casey, 1981–1987. The OSS's influence can also be seen in the CIA's use of various religious organizations, Catholic and otherwise, during the Cold War.

For all of Protestant America's longstanding critiques of Catholic Americans, including that the Church was more political than religious and that its members could not be trusted to safeguard democracy, there is a certain irony that Catholicism became the blueprint for American intelligence operations with other religious organizations in the Cold War. Within a decade of the OSS's dissolution the CIA would, in the tradition of Donovan, rely upon Catholic help in Italy, Vietnam, and other hotspots. When the time again came for help from Americans of faith, future American intelligence officers would not relegate Catholic contributions to the shadows. Indeed, they would work earnestly to make sure that they found the light.